

Lunch with the President

The Rockefeller commission's report on the Central Intelligence Agency is something of a vindication for the New York *Times*, which broke the story of CIA domestic spying in an article last Dec. 22 by Investigative Reporter Seymour Hersh. Yet for months the *Times* sat on an even juicier part of the CIA story—President Ford's concern over the agency's alleged role in foreign assassination plots—but chose not to print it. *Times* editors last week were standing by their decision, but the episode underlined the hazards of giving and taking off-the-record information.

Shortly after Hersh's CIA story, White House Press Secretary Ron Nessen called Clifton Daniel, the *Times* Washington bureau chief, and told him that invitations were being sent for an "informal" lunch with the President. On Jan. 16, seven top *Times*men were ushered into a small dining room in the East Wing for lamb chops with Ford, Nessen, Chief of Staff Donald Rumsfeld, Economic Adviser Alan Greenspan and Special Consultant Robert Goldwin. The gathering was cordial, though Ford occasionally interjected "Now this is off the record" and "This is not for public." Talk eventually turned to the Rockefeller commission. Ford expressed concern that the inquiry could uncover embarrassing CIA activities not related to domestic spying. "Like what?" asked Managing Editor A.M. Rosenthal, always the reporter. Replied the President: "Assassinations."

Ford's Concern. Afterward, the editors gathered in Daniel's office and agreed that since the lunch was off the record, the *Times* could not print the President's disclosure. When Daniel tried to get Nessen to relent and put the quote on the record, the press secretary stood firm. A day or two later, Daniel chatted with Reporter Hersh about the CIA's possible role in foreign assassinations, but Daniel says he did not reveal the President's mention of the subject; in any case, Hersh kept busy on the story's domestic angle. "Why didn't I tell him to drop everything and get on the foreign-assassination story?" asks Daniel. "Because it wasn't new. What was new was that Ford was concerned. We couldn't print that story. I don't take my word lightly. I don't think gentlemen and journalists are mutually exclusive."

Word of the lunch eventually got to CBS Newsman Daniel Schorr, who on Feb. 28 reported the President's concern about CIA assassination plots. Schorr's report stirred a mild sensation, and former CIA Director Richard Helms denounced the reporter as "Killer Schorr! Killer Schorr!" But by then the Rockefeller commission had begun its investigation, and its final report pleads



TIMES REPORTER SEYMOUR HERSH
Secrets will out.

—not too convincingly—that there was not enough time to examine the subject fully. Schorr refuses to identify his source.

Did the President deliberately make that off-the-record lunchtime disclosure in order to keep the paper—and the hard-charging Hersh—off the assassination trail? Government and corporate officials occasionally try to "lock up" news organizations with strategically placed not-for-publication disclosures. In the President's case, it is unlikely that he spoke out of guile. "I don't know how devious the President is," answers Ron Nessen, "and I'm not going to ask him." Managing Editor Rosenthal sees no skulduggery in the President's remark. Says he: "How did he know that we would respect the off-the-record part?"

Leaky Table. Not everyone at the *Times* is entirely pleased that the paper elected to be so trustworthy. "As far as I'm concerned, when you've got that many people around a table, nothing is off the record," says Associate Editor Tom Wicker, who attended the lunch. "But I work here, so I accepted the decision." Says Hersh: "Things have a way of leaking—which is why it's ridiculous to make those agreements."

Ridiculous it may be, but journalists often find it essential to let their sources say things privately that they would never say otherwise. Some of these sources may try to entomb sensitive information by using the off-the-record stratagem, but the presidential luncheon episode seems to prove, as Seymour Hersh says, that such things do have a way of getting out.